

A Deeper Dive into IBS Relief

Session Six: Sleep is as important to our long-term health as are the many choices we make and actions we take during our waking hours. When it comes to IBS management, restful sleep rhythms is key. Read on.



IBS Relief Now!

Session Six: Sleeping Our Way to Better IBS Control

What is the Big Deal About Sleep

All living creatures engage in some form of sleep. While the specific form of this sleep varies across species, the fact we *all do it* highlights how central sleep is for life. When we get too little sleep, the amount and pattern of sleeping changes in a biological effort to “catch up.” Also, if we go without enough sleep on a chronic basis, the list of negative health consequences we suffer, which includes heightened risks of dementia, obesity, depression, diabetes, sexual dysfunction, and digestive disorders, grows quite long. Amazingly, the scientific jury is still out when it comes to fully understanding exactly how sleep protects our long-term health. Still, we do have a pretty good picture of what is going on in our brains and bodies when we are snoozing away at night.

Let’s start our search by exploring a basic need that organisms as complex as we are must meet. The more complex an organism, the greater the need to have all the creature’s pieces and parts talk to each other. In other words, there is a massive need for coordination. Science is revealing that sleep is when the brain coordinates and filters experience to strengthen what is important and to remove the rest. This nightly clean-up and clean-out of proteins and other molecular byproducts of daily experiences leaves the brain and body refreshed and re-energized for another day when we awaken the next morning from a good night’s sleep.

Without regular, restorative sleep, the wear and tear of daily life on our brain and body accumulate and

show up in harmful ways. Our internal functions and rhythms – breathing, appetite and food cravings, cognitive functioning, heart rhythms, blood sugar management, physical and mental reaction times, and even our muscular coordination – all begin to suffer. Sleep helps us to keep humming along like a well-tuned Ferrari... or at least a reliable Ford.

Sleep and Digestive Health

In Session Three’s **Deeper Dive**, we discussed the microbiome, the dynamic microscopic world of bacteria, immune cell activity, and digestive processes that regulate so much of our health. We now know that these gut bacteria not only have their own 24-hour rhythms of activity and rest (our circadian rhythm), the composition of that bacteria – the ratios of good to bad bacteria living in our digestive tracts – influences our own cycles of wakefulness and sleep.

As strange as it seems, we operate in a complex system of interacting loops of influence. What we eat affects the composition of our bacterial flora. Our bacterial residents shape our food cravings, which

may be good for them, but not necessarily good for our overall health. Also, our microbiomic community



powerfully influences our lifestyle choices – sedentary or active – as well as working to shape when and how we sleep.

Our bacteria shape us. And, our choices shape our bacteria. That mutual back-scratching can reinforce health habits and patterns or, as with IBS, the mutual reinforcement can be in negative directions that maintain digestive dysregulation, anxiety, and lifestyle patterns that do little to support good and stable physical and mental health.

Therefore, when it comes to IBS management, developing mindful attention skills regarding when and how we eat, which sometimes involves choices that are in direct contradiction to our bacteria-driven urges and cravings, helps break up unhealthy patterns of digestive function. Better microbiomic balance emerges. At the same time, those unhealthy sleep rhythms and daily activity patterns can begin to change in directions that support better overall health and functioning.

A Two-Way Influence

As fascinating as it is that bacteria can exert such a strong influence on our mental and behavioral choices,



the fact remains that this influence works in both directions. When we develop lifestyle habits that sacrifice sleep for the sake of more party-time, more workaholic tendencies,

less healthy routines, and highly variable sleep/wake times, we exert powerful influences on the type of bacteria that multiply in our gut and on those that get actively suppressed. And, as those ratios change, so does our circadian rhythm.

Once again, we find ourselves in a web of intersecting loops. Poor sleep habits “feed” bacteria that support poorer sleep habits. In turn, those poor sleep habits negatively impact digestive health. Moreover, they reinforce IBS symptoms patterns by depriving the brain and body of the fundamental coordination

benefits of sleep. This leads to greater digestive dysregulation and weaker IBS symptom control. So, learning to restore healthier routines for waking up, winding down, and obtaining restful, restorative sleep each night, is an important dimension of a program to regain control of IBS.

Sleep and Emotional Well-being

Psychological health gets disrupted by IBS. Worries mount. Rates of depression increase. Research studies suggest that while more frequent reports of anxiety and depression are understandable as a reaction to the presence of IBS, there is more to the story. Recent evidence suggests that higher rates of anxiety, depression, and even changes in mental functioning may be symptoms of a more comprehensive view of IBS. Once again, the health of our microbiome may be the underlying explanation.

We have discussed the various pathways by which gut bacteria can impact sleep patterns. Now, let’s look at what happens at an emotional/psychological level when sleep is chronically disrupted. Emotional regulation is a term that reflects our ability to activate appropriate emotional responses in the face of challenges we face, which then guide our choices of how to adaptively respond to those challenges. When we are sleep deprived, several important shifts occur in our emotional regulation abilities. Unfortunately, these shifts don’t bode well effective IBS control.



Emotional regulation, by definition, involves rapid filtering of what is or is not worth responding do with emotional activation, which begins the cascade of bodily changes that eventually result in a behavioral response. If everything is important, then we are chronically over-responding. People may describe us as overly “sensitive” or as being “too reactive” or “too touchy.” But, without restorative sleep, that is exactly true: Research shows we lose the ability to

discriminate between what is important and worth responding to. When we are *always* responding, we are *always* turning on our stress response systems. As a result, poor sleep leads us to become even more energetically depleted by going to the stress response well too often. Our energy reserves begin to tank. We find ourselves in yet another negative loop in which everything begins to feel threatening and everything seems to warrant an energy-consuming emotionally-driven stress response. A secondary change accelerates the difficulty. Gradually, with poor sleep, heightened reactivity, and dysregulated stress responsiveness, we also lose our ability to control our emotional braking system. We react quickly and strongly. We become impulsive and reactive. This is a combination that exerts a strong negative influence on IBS control.



Showing stable digestive functioning depends on having the time to think, to consider, to weigh the pros and cons, and to only then react with proper discrimination. Otherwise, we kick into the sympathetic branch of our autonomic nervous system, and off to the high distress level race we go (see **Deeper Dive** Session Two)! With time, our resiliency drops and we find it takes us less and less of a negative experience to generate within us a sense of being overwhelmed and highly distressed. This finding is entirely consistent with the reports that rates of depression and anxiety among IBS sufferers are higher than that rates found in the general population.

Restoring Health Sleep Rhythms

Any good system that is filled with feedback loop has the capacity to get back on track when it finds itself off-track. When sleep rhythms are off and IBS is active, getting back on track is not only possible, it is necessary.

While sleep is a built-in, hard-wired biological need, it is also a learned behavior. Therefore, sleep can be

improved by applying lessons about how we learn and what it takes to learn healthy habits.

The first step in restoring sleep involves the decision as to whether you truly believe that sleep is important. Unless people shift the balance from viewing sleep as a time-waster to appreciating sleep as a fundamental regulator of how you get to spend your time – managing symptoms or enjoying life – your sleep habits are unlikely to change.



Second, it is important to see sleeping as the mirror image of our days. Hectic, pressure-filled, or emotionally unsatisfying days can lead to hectic and unsatisfying nights. While we don't often have full control over the pace of our days, we can learn to exert better control over the pace and timing of how we wind down at the end of each day. A central element of winding down involves becoming attuned to nature's rhythms. As the sun sets, our levels of physical activity and exposure to mental stimulation should be decreasing, as well. Bright lights and loud sounds should be turned down. We should practice entering a wind-down phase of our days.

Finally, to enhance the wind-down quality of our evenings as we prepare for sleep, attending to the content of our minds matters. If your mind is weighed down by worries, frustrations, resentments, or disappointments, it is imperative to off-load them before bed. Taking 10-15 minutes to write them down and put them aside can help. This practice can also help when our minds are flooded with to-do lists. Let the paper store the list of what must be done, not your tired mind. Evenings are also a wonderful time for self-regulating practices like meditation, listening to music, a leisurely walk, a warm bath, or a conversation with an intimate partner that strengthens connections and feelings of emotional security. Then, a cup of warm tea (e.g., Chamomile) before climbing into bed, where a relaxing guided imagery exercise plays, can

usher you off to dream-land with a comfortable and calm mind.

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FACTS – Summary of important points

- Sleep functions as a grand biological regulator of brain health, gut stability, and emotional resilience.
- Without regular patterns of restorative sleep, ideally lasting at least 7 hours each night, a large and diverse number of health problems affecting essentially every organ system in the body begin to emerge.
- IBS is more difficult to manage when sleep rhythms are off. Making the establishment of regular sleep routines a priority is an important non-pharmacological approach to managing IBS.
- Recent research studies show that IBS affects more than the gut. A comprehensive picture of IBS reveals the high rate at which cognitive (poor memory and attention), mood disturbance, worry, fatigue, and bodily pain are also present. This suggests a common underlying factor, which may involve the presence of an unhealthy gut microbiome.
- Vicious loops operate to worsen IBS when sleep is off, which affects the balance of our bacterial flora, which worsens emotional regulation, which negatively impacts eating and behavioral functioning, which worsens IBS, etc.
- Since sleep is a learned behavior in addition to being a biologically hard-wired function, we can apply methods of healthy habit growth to re-establish restorative sleep patterns.

ACTS – What you can begin doing NOW

Improving sleep takes time and practice, but can be learned when the following approaches are utilized.

- During your daytime hours, practice noticing when frustrations and stress levels climb. Use diaphragmatic breathing exercises for 30-60 seconds to release the distress and prevent the build-up of tensions that can spill over into sleep
- Establish a daily movement practice. For some this involves regular visits to a gym. But, for many, a 20-30-minute walk, 3-5 times per week, is sufficient to metabolize stress chemicals that can otherwise disrupt healthy sleep rhythms.
- As the sun begins to set, go into “wind-down” mode. Slow the physical pace of your movements. Turn down lights. Reduce activities that are mentally challenging or emotionally taxing. Spend time, if possible, with people you love, engaged in quiet, leisurely conversation that leaves you feeling secure and calm.
- Off-load the day’s concerns with a writing practice (more details above in this Deeper Dive issue).
- Leave as close to 3-hours after meals before going to bed. Have a cup of Chamomile or similar warm, non-caffeinated, drink before bed. Listen to a guided imagery to gently walk you into comfortable sleep.

Stay Tuned: In the next **Deeper Dive**, (Session Seven) we will explore the role of our personal history in activating

and maintaining IBS symptoms. The frequency or “base rate” of painful personal histories, including experiences

*of victimization and abuse, are high with IBS sufferers.
Putting the past in the past is key. See you soon!*